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# EVALUABILITY ASSESSMENTS OF THE CIRCLES OF SUPPORT AND ACCOUNTABILITY (COSA) MODEL

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## SITE REPORT: COSA DURHAM

July 31, 2013

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## ABSTRACT

According to the U.S. National Reentry Resource Center (NRRC) at least 95% of state prisoners are released back to their communities after a period of incarceration. Both criminal justice agencies and the general public are often particularly conscious of the issue of sex offenders returning to the community because of the potentially negative biological and psychiatric outcomes for victims (e.g., Andersen, Tomada, Vincow, Valente, Polcari, & Teicher, 2008 ; Chen et al., 2010). Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) is a restorative justice-based community reentry program for high-risk sex offenders with little or no pro-social community support, originating from Ontario, Canada. There have been no rigorous large-scale outcome evaluations of COSA conducted to date. An evaluability assessment was conducted of COSA across five sites with the goal of assessing the readiness of COSA provision in the U.S. for rigorous evaluation. This report is a for COSA provision at one of those sites: COSA Durham, North Carolina. The assessment aimed to clarify program intent, explore program reality, examine program data capacity, analyze program fidelity, and propose potential evaluation designs for future evaluation. A summarized 'intended model' is presented that sought to illustrate the espoused theory of COSA.

COSA Durham is funded in part by the Durham County Criminal Justice Resource Center (CJRC) and located in Durham Congregations in Action (DCIA). According to recent North Carolina Department of Justice statistics approximately 272 registered sex offenders reside in communities in the Durham, NC region. The COSA model established at COSA Durham is an adapted version of the Correctional Services Canada model (CSC, 2002; 2003). At the time of the site visit, COSA Durham was in the program development stage

and not operating any Circles. COSA Durham was awarded a fidelity score of 24%. The anticipated COSA Durham model appears to deviate from the intended model in a one key way. Selected Core Members may not have fully completed the whole of their sentence and all returning sex offenders are subject to 5 years post-release supervision. It was not possible to assess data management because the project is still in development. The key obstacle to evaluation is that the site is currently at very low capacity. Nonetheless, it is clear that the project is well-resourced (both in terms of finance and personnel), has a strong model in place, and has learned valuable lessons from its first unsuccessful incarnation. It is concluded, however, that at this time COSA Durham cannot be considered to be operating at a sufficient capacity that would allow it to positively contribute to rigorous evaluation.

## INTRODUCTION

According to the U.S. National Reentry Resource Center (NRRC), during 2010 a total of 708,677 prisoners were released back from state and federal prisons into their communities. Both criminal justice agencies and the general public are often particularly conscious of the complex issue of sex offenders returning to their communities because of the potentially negative biological and psychiatric outcomes for victims (e.g., Andersen, Tomada, Vincow, Valente, Polcari, & Teicher, 2008 ; Chen et al., 2010).

Due to these negative outcomes, criminal justice responses to sex offender reentry have typically involved tightening supervision for sex offenders and the introduction of stringent legislation on registration, notification, and residency. Recent recidivism data from 73 studies and 35,522 offenders, however, demonstrate an observed overall sexual recidivism rate of 12.4%, with a 10-year rate of 16.6% (Helmus, Hanson, Thornton, Babchishin, & Harris, 2012). Despite low re-offense rates, many jurisdictions have adopted containment models for sex offender community management (English, 1998; 2004) - victim-focused, multi-agency approaches that combine case evaluation, risk assessment, sex offender treatment, and intense community surveillance.

Yet, amid the increases in criminal justice system's surveillance of sex offenders, there is a growing interest among both criminal justice practitioners and academics in developing restorative justice approaches. Restorative justice is a philosophy that aims to redirect society's punitive response to crime and increase public safety through reconciliatory action between offenders, victims, and the community (Sullivan & Tifft, 2005). It has been noted that interventions offered by non-correctional enterprises may be better positioned to respond to individual characteristics and circumstances when

providing offender treatment and management than correctional organizations (Wilson & Yates, 2009).

## **Circles of Support and Accountability**

Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) is a restorative justice-based community reentry program for sex offenders deemed to be at the highest risk of reoffending and with little or no pro-social community support. According to the Correctional Services of Canada model (Correctional Services Canada: CSC, 2002; 2003), the mission statement of COSA is: "[to] substantially reduce the risk of future sexual victimization of community members by assisting and supporting released individuals in their task of integrating with the community and leading responsible, productive, and accountable lives" (CSC, 2002: p. 12). An adaptation of the CSC model is described in further detail in a section below.

There have been no rigorous large-scale outcome evaluations of the COSA program conducted to date. Some small-scale outcome evaluations have been published (see Bates, Williams, Wilson, and Wilson, 2013; Duwe, 2013; Wilson, McWhinnie, Picheca, Prinzo, & Cortoni, 2007; Wilson, Cortoni, & McWhinnie, 2009) that suggest COSA may be responsible for a reduction of 77% in sexual recidivism in COSA Core Members versus controls after an average follow-up time of 4 years. Given the varying quality of these studies, however, in terms of retroactive matching of experimental and control samples, imperfect methods for matching, the integrity of statistical analysis, and the lack of statistically significant experimental results, it could be argued that this figure should be considered only an

estimate of effectiveness. Thus further, rigorous evaluation of COSA is needed before it can truly be considered to be evidence-based practice.

## **Evaluability assessment**

This report is part of a series of reports outlining a National Institute of Justice-funded evaluability assessment of the provision of COSA at various sites in the U.S. This report is one of five, with an accompanying cross-site report, for the five COSA sites evaluated as part of the evaluability assessment. The report examines program operations, data capacity, and program fidelity at Vermont COSA, and proposes evaluation designs and challenges. The goal of this evaluability assessment is to examine the readiness of those five COSA programs for rigorous evaluation. This assessment has five specific evaluation goals (from Wholey, 2004): (1) clarifying program intent by developing an intended COSA program model; (2) exploring program reality and COSA program operations in action on site; (3) examining program data capacity; (4) analyzing program fidelity and the congruence between intended program logic and actual program operations; and (5) proposing potential evaluation designs and challenges based on site readiness for further evaluation activities.

## **COSA intended model**

The accompanying cross-site report describes an intended COSA model<sup>1</sup> created for the purpose of this evaluability assessment, based predominantly on the Correctional

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth referred to as the 'intended COSA model' or the 'intended model'.

Services Canada model<sup>2</sup> (CSC, 2002; 2003). The intended model consists of two concentric interpersonal circles surrounding a Core Member (an offender): (1) an inner circle of four to six professionally-facilitated community volunteers who act as a supportive community to whom the Core Member agrees to be accountable; and (2) an outer circle of professionals (e.g., therapists, probation, law enforcement) who provide expert guidance on areas including, but not limited to, offender behavior, offender management principles, the legal and criminal justice contexts.

The intended model of COSA separates the elements of COSA into two components: (1) *people* - the various key players involved in the operation of COSA; and (2) *processes* - the operational procedures that take place from the conception of COSA to the dissolution of the first Circle. There are four groups of key players. The first group is the COSA project staff - the Advisory Group, the Program Director, and the Circle Coordinator. The second group is the service users - the Core Member and the volunteers. The third group is the specific criminal justice staff or organizations (the referrers) - the Department of Corrections (DOC), parole and probation, and local police forces. The fourth group is the community service providers, including survivor advocacy groups, lawyers, treatment providers/psychologists, social workers, healthcare professionals, educational professionals, and faith-based organizations.

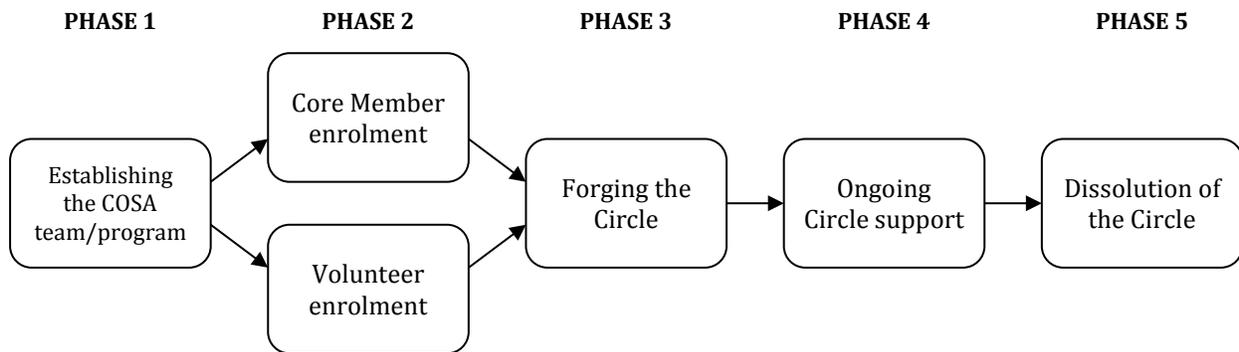
The Program Director oversees the five phases of the COSA program development process (see Figure 1): (1) establishing the COSA team and program; (2a) Core Member enrolment and (2b) volunteer enrolment; (3) forging the Circle; (4) ongoing Circle support;

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<sup>2</sup> Henceforth referred to as the 'CSC model'.

and (5) dissolution of the Circle. The following sections outline each of the phases of the model in turn.

**Figure 1.** The five phases of the COSA program development process.



Having summarized the intended model, the following sections of this report will:

(a) describe the history and context of COSA provision at the site, outline it's aims, and report current capacity; (b) apply the five phases of COSA model development process model to implementation at the site; and (c) draw conclusions on the fidelity of the COSA program and make recommendations about capacity for evaluation at the site.

## SITE INFORMATION

### History and context

COSA Durham<sup>3</sup> is funded in part by the Durham County Criminal Justice Resource Center (CJRC) and located in Durham Congregations in Action (DCIA) an interfaith, inter-racial organization of 62 congregations. DCIA aims to unite local congregations to promote understanding across boundaries of faith, race and ethnicity and build an inclusive community of justice. The CJRC is supported by the State criminal justice agencies; however the vast majority of their funding comes from Durham County government.

The CJRC supports offenders from pre-trial to prison reentry, including programs related to jail sentencing, offender mental health, offender treatment programs, and community-based corrections. They also work with individuals who are under post-release supervision, including sex offenders, who typically receive five years of post-release supervision. In the mid-1990's North Carolina abolished parole and replaced it with post-release supervision, for sex offenders and other serious and/or violent offenders. Now, according to recent North Carolina Department of Justice statistics<sup>4</sup> approximately 272 registered sex offenders reside in communities in the Durham, NC region. Sex offenders in North Carolina are legally mandated to five years post-release supervision in the community, are subject to registration, notification and residence restrictions, and are not allowed to leave the County for the first 90 days after release.

The development of COSA Durham began in 2011 when Nick McGeorge, a U.K. forensic psychologist who resides part-time in Durham, arranged a series of meetings

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<sup>3</sup> The project is occasionally referred to as Circles of *Supervision* and Accountability in some contexts.

<sup>4</sup> <http://sexoffender.ncdoj.gov/stats.aspx>

between the CJRC and one of the Correctional Services Canada model (CSC, 2002; 2003) developers, Dr. Robin Wilson. A private donation was received that allowed the CJRC to arrange a training session by Dr. Wilson in April 2012, attended by the Steering Committee and a number of potential volunteers from the community. This training session yielded five volunteers from a local Quaker group. A Core Member was identified and the first Circle was forged almost immediately without the development of any formal policies or procedures and without a Circles Coordinator. The Circle was unsuccessful. Reasons for the breakdown of the Circle ranged from a lack of Circle contact, a lack of leadership or responsibility, and a Core Member unwilling to adhere to the covenant.

Taking these experiences into account the CJRC sought to find funding, re-start the program, and more comprehensively develop program operations before forging a Circle. The CJRC applied for an Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking (SMART) grant, which became effective in January 2013.

### **Aims, goals, and mission**

The COSA model established at COSA Durham is an adapted version of the Correctional Services Canada model (CSC, 2002; 2003). The COSA Durham mission is taken from the CSC model – 'no more victims'. The organizational objectives of COSA are linked to the SMART grant objectives: reductions in recidivism, the recruitment and retention of suitable Core Members, and the recruitment and training of community volunteers. The aim is that COSA Durham should be a community-driven project and becoming a non-profit would allow the program to remain in partnership with the CJRC and local government,

while maintaining autonomy. A long-term goal of COSA Durham is to become a separate non-profit organization.

### **Current capacity**

At the time of the site visit, COSA Durham was in the program development stage and not operating any Circles.

## IMPLEMENTATION

It is important to note that because COSA Durham is currently running at zero capacity, the following sections discuss *intended* implementation that may not represent eventual program reality.

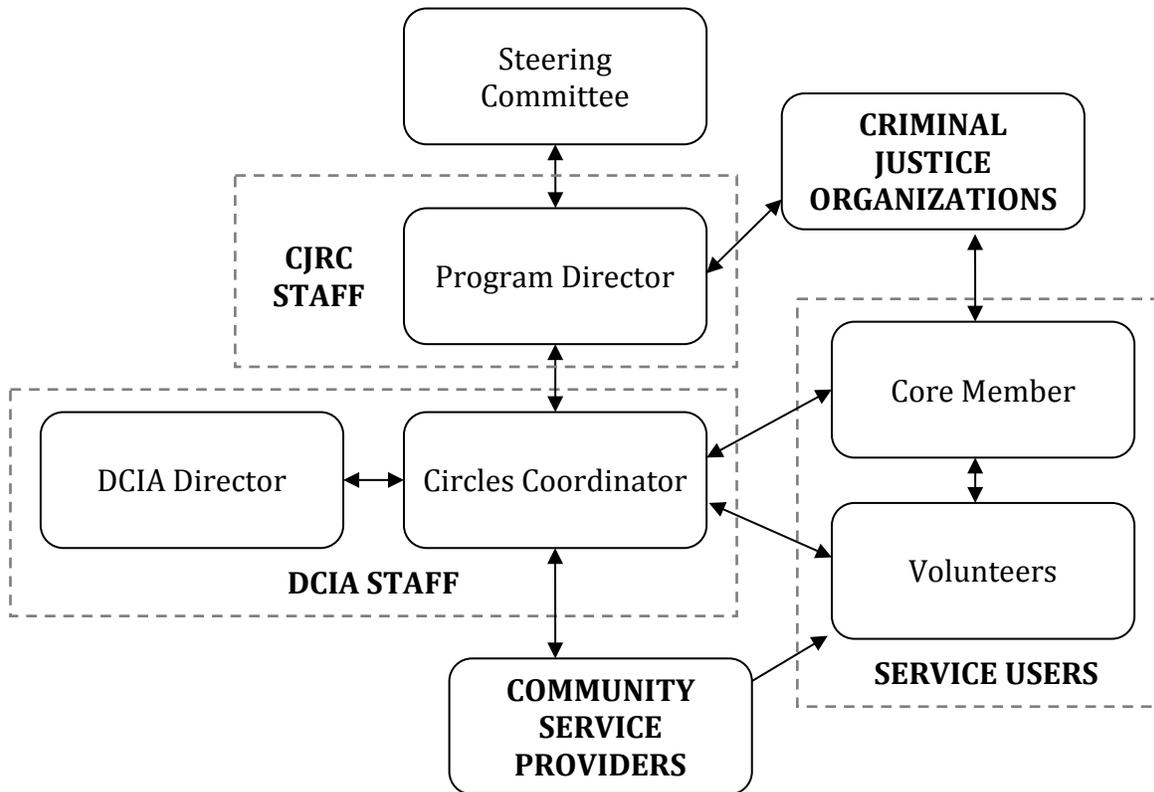
### Phase 1: Establishing the COSA team and program

The COSA Durham program is directed by the CJRC, through a COSA Program Director, who sub-contracts responsibility and resources for implementation to Durham Congregations in Action (DCIA) (see Figure 2 for a schematic illustration of the management structure). The DCIA's sponsorship of COSA Durham covers a number of responsibilities, including providing a non-profit framework for legal compliance, bookkeeping, and providing financial reports and fiscal accountability. The Program Director is responsible for the development of the program, reporting outcomes to the Steering Committee and to the DCIA, and the recruitment of Core Members and volunteers. The majority of the SMART funds have been used to recruit a full-time Project Coordinator, who is employed by the DCIA. The Project Coordinator is responsible for the operational management of COSA outreach and building community relationships. An advisor, the Director of a local community justice organization, also receives funding a number of hours per week to contribute time to COSA activities.

A Steering Committee has been appointed that is responsible for operational strategy. The Steering Committee includes a psychiatrist, a forensic psychologist, a local attorney-at-law (the current COSA Chair), and various Directors and senior management

figures at local community justice groups (including DCIA, The Religious Coalition for a Nonviolent Durham, the Human Kindness Foundation). The Steering Committee has also received COSA training.

**Figure 2.** The COSA Durham management structure.



COSA Durham also has close working relationships with the local Probation Office, the State Post-Release Supervision Committee, the regional mental health authorities and a number of community organizations through links already established with the CJRC.

## Phase 2a: Core Member enrolment

The screening process begins while the offender is in prison, preferably at least 90 days before their release date. Case managers at North Carolina DOC institutions will alert the regional Probation Agent if an inmate is due to be released to Durham County. Referrals are received in writing, or via telephone or email, by the Project Coordinator. The Project Coordinator schedules an interview with the applicant and their Parole or Probation Agent either at the institution or by telephone. This interview is intended to provide the applicant with information about COSA, what is expected of them if they choose to become involved, and what they can expect of the Circle. Consent is requested for the release of the applicant's file information, including offense history, index offense, progress in treatment, release destination and their level of social support in the community. These are reviewed to gauge the potential core member's suitability for COSA.

The selection criteria are: (1) high risk sex offenders (a Static-99 score of 4 or higher as assessed by the referring institution); (2) must be returning to Durham and has a legitimate connection to the area; (3) has no social support or community resources; (4) willing to accept responsibility for their crime; (5) willing to cooperate with conditions of release; (6) willing to commit to dealing with other issues (e.g., substance abuse, mental health, etc.); and (7) willing to commit to a one year Circle duration.

If the applicant is willing to commit to COSA, release forms are completed authorizing the release of personal file information to the volunteers and Circles professionals. The Program Director then presents the recommendation to the Steering Committee. A final decision is made by the Steering Committee about whether to accept or decline the application. If accepted the applicant is collected from the institution and taken

to transitional housing (or taken by the Post-Release Officer) where their Circle will meet with them to welcome them back into the community. Finally, the new Core Member's Probation Officer conducts a Risk and Needs Assessment within the first 60 days of release.

## **Phase 2b: Volunteer enrolment**

Volunteers will be recruited mainly from faith-based organizations, Duke University's Divinity programs, the University of North Carolina Social Work program, and the regional Newman Center. Volunteers will be recruited via two 'pipelines': a 'champion' pipeline and a 'volunteer' pipeline. In the 'champion pipeline' the Project Coordinator seeks to gain an introduction to an organization, identify champions within that organization, and get them motivated to encourage members of their organization to volunteer. A mailing list is being created to solicit champions and volunteers from a number of community organizations. In the 'volunteer pipeline' volunteers are identified by the Project Coordinator, by a champion, via the website, or from a community event, and the Project Coordinator makes contact via telephone or email to provide a short description of COSA.

The Project Coordinator invites the potential volunteer to an informational session, at which they are informed about COSA. The potential volunteer is then invited to an 8-hour training session after which they can choose to complete an application form. The application form inquires about the potential volunteer's motivations for applying for COSA, their previous volunteering experience, their criminal history, their prior experiences of victimization, and if there are any groups that they would be unwilling to work with. A formal interview would only be conducted if the application form highlighted a potential concern. Volunteers must reside in Durham County or a neighboring county.

Potential volunteers are not subject to an official criminal background check. Potential volunteers will, however, be asked to provide a 5-year employment history and three personal references from individuals in the community who have known them for at least three years.

Core training will be conducted by Dr. Robin Wilson until the COSA Durham staff is sufficiently able to deliver training themselves. In addition to the core training, potential applicants will be required to take six two-hour classes. The Project Coordinator aims to provide a 'menu' of classes, including active listening, team building, and so forth, and provide them as ongoing every 6-8 weeks.

### **Phase 3: Forging the Circle**

The operational procedures for Circle practices are currently being developed, but some information about Circle practices was made available. There will be 4-5 volunteers per Circle. The Project Coordinator will arrange Circle meetings and attend in their early stages, but will reduce their input once the Circle begins to develop. The Core Member will be provided with a pre-paid cellular telephone in order to maintain contact with the Circle. The first Circle meeting will occur within the first 7 days of release – preferably on the day of release. The meeting on the release day will be used to debrief the Core Member and priorities will be established for the coming weeks. Schedules for meetings and contact with volunteers will be created. A volunteer (or volunteers) will contact the Core Member every day for the first few weeks.

Reviewing the covenant and the conditions of release will be an immediate priority for the Circle and personal boundaries should be discussed and established. A draft

covenant will be completed prior to the Core Member's release. Some concepts will be included in all covenants, such as an agreement from the Core Member to adhere to all legal restrictions, a commitment to an offense-free life, a commitment from the volunteers to have contact with the Core Member on a regular basis, and an agreement from all to commit to a one year life-cycle for the Circle. The covenant will also include agreements specific to the Core Member and their circumstances. Decisions will be made on a consensus basis and the covenant will be considered a living document that will be modified if necessary.

#### **Phase 4: Ongoing Circle support**

Weekly meetings will be scheduled where activities in the previous week are discussed. Volunteers will spend an average of 3 hours per week in contact with the Core Member. If there are concerns within a Circle the volunteers will report these to the Project Coordinator who will decide if a member of the outer circle can assist. As the Circle develops one-on-one contact may become less frequent and contact will be dictated by need, confidence, and trust.

All meetings of the Circle will be conducted with the Core Member present unless unusual circumstances arise. If there are serious concerns, or if there have been breaches of the conditions of release, re-offending, risk to a member of the community or the Core Member, an emergency meeting will be arranged. In some instances, housekeeping meetings may be called without the Core Member to discuss internal issues and tension and discuss and seek to resolve potential concerns about inappropriate behavior. The Circle would be expected to contact the Core Member's Probation Officer if there were

serious concerns. Some Core Members may be on Global Positioning System bracelets, and their Circle will assist the Parole Department in ensuring compliance with this requirement.

The Project Coordinator is establishing data collection and management policies. A secure online Wiki for Circle members to communicate with each other and the COSA Durham staff is being created. This will allow staff to log time spent in contact with the Core Member, to track Circle meeting notes, and to highlight concerns and other information. The Project Coordinator will conduct monthly progress interviews, either in person or via telephone, during the first year.

The Project Coordinator will maintain contact with all volunteers during their first year with a Circle and provide support. The volunteer training includes information about setting personal boundaries. Other safety guidelines will be in place, such as ensuring that there are always two volunteers if necessary. The Project Coordinator is also developing a best practice document for how organizations can address potential issues arising from having a registered sex offender on site.

## **Phase 5: Dissolution of the Circle**

There are currently no policies or procedures to guide the process once the Circle have been operational for one year. It is anticipated that healthy Circles will remain active for as long as is deemed appropriate by the Circle and the Project Coordinator. If the Core Member is re-incarcerated then the Circle will be encouraged to continue to provide support. If the period of incarceration is considered too long then the Circle is disbanded.

**EVALUABILITY ASSESSMENTS OF THE COSA MODEL - COSA DURHAM**

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## **FINDINGS**

### **Fidelity Score**

COSA Durham was awarded a fidelity score of 24%. Fidelity was assessed using a fidelity item measurement tool that examines 41 intended program elements across 10 fidelity categories, including management, model, operations, outcomes, staff, Core Members and volunteers. There were 100 items in total that could be endorsed. The fidelity score represents the percentage of these fidelity items that were observed in program reality.

There is no definitive consensus on what constitutes high program fidelity, but evidence suggests fidelity levels of 60% and greater (i.e., 60% match between program intent and program reality) are associated with strong outcomes (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Latessa & Lowenkamp, 2006). Thus, for this evaluability assessment programs with an implementation score approaching or exceeding 60% are considered to be well-implemented.

### **Deviations from the intended model**

The anticipated COSA Durham model appears to deviate from the intended model in a one key way. Selected Core Members may not have fully completed the whole of their sentence and all returning sex offenders are subject to 5 years post-release supervision. Therefore, they will be under a combination of COSA and Probation supervision. This could have serious implications if any future multi-site evaluation were to include both 'fully-completed' and 'under supervision' offenders. This would represent a systematic difference

in both the relative community support and accountability environments into which each type of offender would re-enter.

### **Quality of data systems**

It was not possible to assess data management because the project is still in development. COSA Durham has plans in terms of how data will be collected and managed, such as the use of secure Wikis on which volunteers can input Circle data. The project will need to be pro-active regarding data management because they are required to report data to the SMART Office as part of the funding requirements.

### **Obstacles to evaluation**

The key obstacle to evaluation is that the site is currently at very low capacity. This means that the site would not be able to either: (a) generate the numbers of participants (or controls) required to contribute to an evaluation; or (b) demonstrate a level of operational fidelity that would allow for the adequate control of program variables.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, COSA Durham is currently operating at zero capacity. Nonetheless, it is clear that the project is well-resourced (both in terms of finance and personnel), has a strong model in place, and has learned valuable lessons from its first unsuccessful incarnation. COSA Durham is in the process of developing comprehensive policies and procedures. They also have strong links and a bond of trust with both the criminal justice agencies and the community organizations that will be responsible for the Core Members in the community. COSA Durham are also seeking innovative solutions to issues in communications and volunteer recruitment that were encountered in the first incarnation, introducing novel and interesting concepts such as the targeted use of their 'champion' pipeline in recruitment and the use of technology for the submission of reports.

It is concluded, however, that at this time COSA Durham cannot be considered to be operating at a sufficient capacity that would allow it to positively contribute to rigorous evaluation.

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